

Project is "wrong youth centre in wrong location"

By Brock Weir

For its detractors, Aurora's new Community Space for Youth, currently underway as part of extensive new renovations at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, has deviated sharply from its original intention as a Youth Centre.

To these councillors, there is a marked difference between a "youth centre" and a "community space for youth."

"This project started out as a youth centre and became a community space for youth and, unbelievably, has become a youth dedicated space of only two per cent of the reconstruction of the complex," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner last week.

"Additionally, we had a project that started out with one intent and after many months has become something that will have a huge effect on the other user groups. In that time, they were never consulted and, in my opinion, that is unfair and wrong.

"I think something the community doesn't really get is this reconstructed complex will cost millions of dollars, the majority of which will be debt funded, yet we have no concrete plan of how and when this will be repaid. I believe this project is not in the community's interest and I believe it is not fiscally responsible."

Councillor John Gallo joined Councillor Gaertner in stating he believed the process leading up to this point was "flawed" and left "much to be desired" for communicating to the public a 12 month closure.

"I would have loved to support this kind of thing," said Councillor Gallo. "Whether the need is there to fix the facility, because that is what I believe we are doing, I am not convinced it is going to become a youth centre or how much of that space is going to be dedicated for youth."

His "overriding" issue, he added, was the cost leading up to that point, approximately \$7 million, when all is said and done to make it a reality, when the Town's reserve accounts, if you take Aurora's Hydro Funds out of the equation, are already in the red.

"My fear is we're stretching ourselves and we're spending beyond our means," he said, noting anticipated revenue coming in for Development Charges have yet to be finalized. "I think a \$15 million deficit in our reserve fund is something we need to deal with. To add another \$7 million to that, when some would even question the need to do this right now is, in my view, irresponsible. I would much rather have these discussions when we have a better sense of what our reserve balances are."

Speaking against the recommendation on the table, Councillor Chris Ballard said while he was supportive of having a youth centre in Aurora, it was the "wrong youth centre in the wrong location."

"My initial concerns about whether this is a youth centre alone continue to be played out," he said. "This is an addition and renovation of the existing AFLC. It says so in the report asking for the funding. If we were to renovate the AFLC, that is fine. We need to have a debate about renovating it and what we want to do with the Centre. It has cost us money and there was even some discussion in the last budget cycle of if we should even keep it open.

"It's nice to hear that the tenders came in about a million under, but our add-ons take it so it is \$40,000 under the original estimate. Here we are about to spend close to \$7 million to renovate the Complex in order to accommodate a youth centre, or under the guise of a youth centre. It's a flawed process and, if it wasn't, we wouldn't have so many angry users here saying it is great you're renovating but you forgot to talk to us about it."

In making his case, Councillor Ballard cited Councillor Gaertner's assertion that only two per cent is dedicated to youth, with the rest programmable space opened up to the community during school hours. Although there was discussion on keeping the space active throughout the day when the youth are in school and, in turn, keeping the revenue flowing in, there are other options to consider.

?There are examples of youth centres that are used throughout the day by youth,? said Councillor Ballard. ?School board activities, even alternative education centres for youth are a distinct possibility [along with] sports facilities, perhaps in cooperation with the school boards.

?That isn't going to happen because we now have other groups using the centre [while] youth are in school. Is it a dedicated youth centre? Absolutely not. A space is dedicated to them, but the rest is going to be shared. There won't be opportunities, in my opinion, of special programming for youth to take place during the school hours, even if it is organized and paid for by school boards.

?I really hope the kids come and use it. I have some concerns that a vast majority won't, but I hope they will use it. It is going to be a beautiful place but I seriously wonder if we can afford it.?